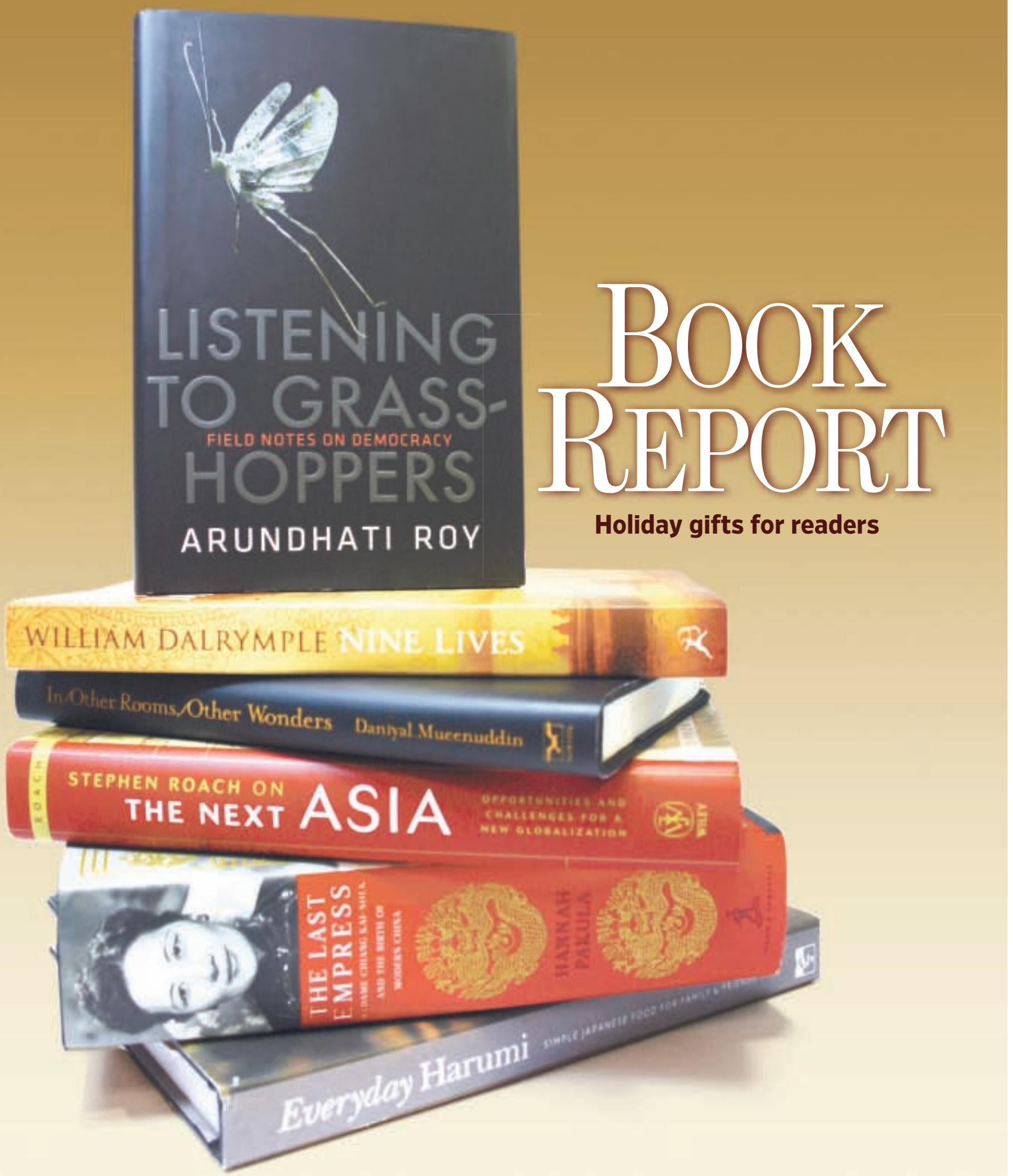
WEEKEND JOURNAL.

ASIA

BOOK REPORT

Holiday gifts for readers


LISTENING TO GRASS-HOPPERS
FIELD NOTES ON DEMOCRACY
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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR A NEW GLOBALIZATION
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Inside: The Collector

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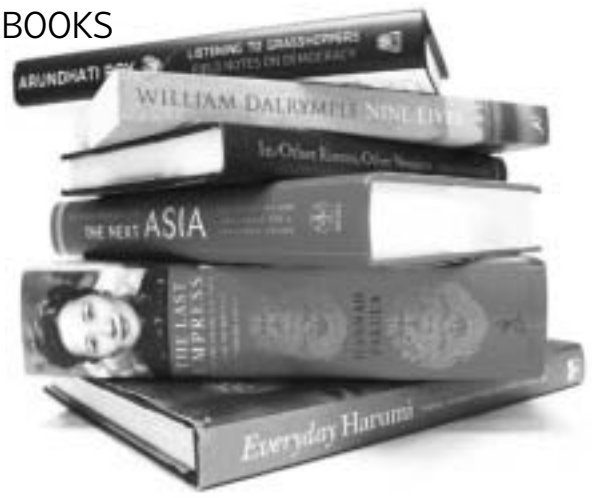

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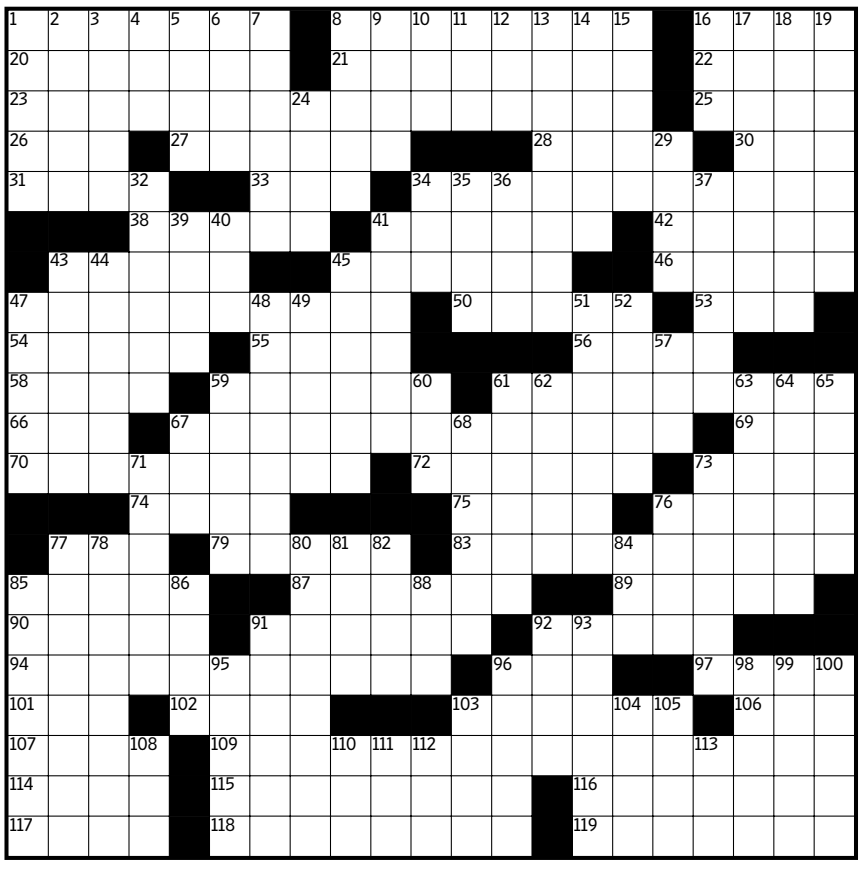
Stocking Stuffing / by Dan Fisher



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Last week's solution

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The real Rembrandt

A Getty show reveals tricks for telling a masterpiece from a fake

By Candace Jackson

A show that opened last week at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles features dozens of authentic Rembrandt drawings—and just as many that aren't. The idea is to reveal to museum-goers the tricks experts and art scholars use to identify his unsigned artwork, something the museum world rarely publicizes.

All the "fake" Rembrandts in the Getty show, which runs through Feb. 28, 2010, had been attributed to the Dutch master painter for hundreds of years, until as recently as a few years ago. Over the past 30 years, new scholarship and cataloguing techniques have helped scholars determine that at least half of the more than 1,000 "Rembrandt" drawings were by others.

One reason for all the confusion: Rembrandt had one of the largest teaching practices in his day, with at least 50 pupils studying closely alongside him in his sprawling Amsterdam studio. The curriculum included close imitations of his style and subject matter, says Lee Hendrix, the Getty curator for the show.

In the 17th century, some students eventually became more famous than Rembrandt, though of course that isn't true today. (In the later years of his life, Rembrandt's naturalistic style fell out of favor with wealthy patrons, who came to prefer a more flattering, less realistic painting, says Ms. Hendrix.) The Getty show features early training drawings by several of his best-known pupils, including Ferdinand Bol.

Another problem for scholars has been that although Rembrandt drew prolifically, very few of his drawings are signed. Scholars have used the signed drawings, and drawings connected with signed paintings, to find themes and symbols common to the unsigned work. These characteristics—like his use of storytelling, expressive faces and directional light—form the basis for modern historians to determine which unsigned works are actually Rembrandts.

"Most people see [authenticating artwork] as a sort of scary, mystical process," says Ms. Hendrix. "It's not."

The Getty has organized the show in several galleries. In each, it has paired drawings side by side, on the left, a real Rembrandt, and on the right, a work done by a student, with text explaining the clues to authorship. There's a central room that viewers can visit and revisit to check, via touch-screen video and text, the tips for identifying Rembrandts.

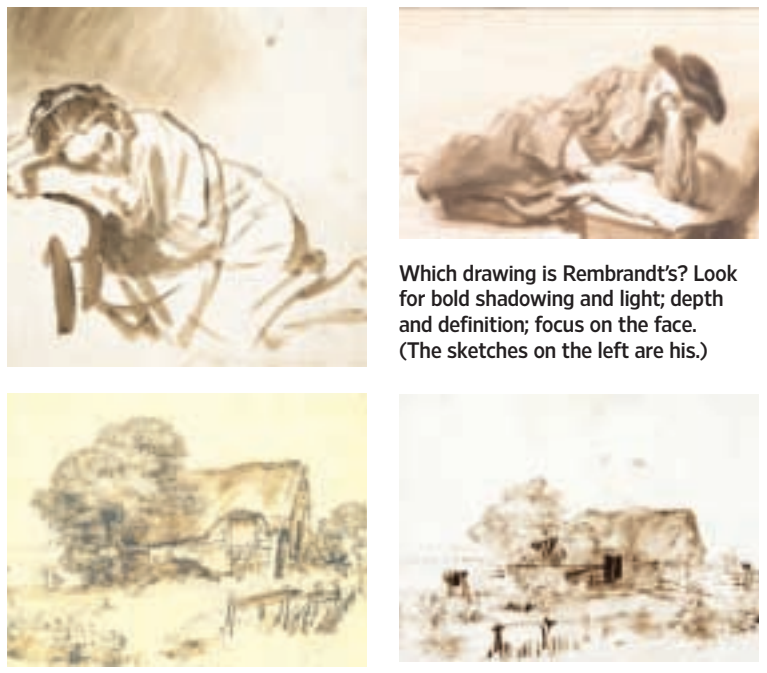
One pair includes a drawing that depicts St. John the Baptist preaching to a group (Rembrandt often painted biblical subjects), another of St. Paul preaching. On the left, Ms. Hendrix points out, the listeners' eight faces each have a distinct expression (bored, fascinated, confused, skeptical). In the other, the listeners are roughly sketched, their faces similar. These drawings were chosen to illustrate Rembrandt's tendency to focus on facial expressions.

Several pairs at the Getty depict the same nude model or street scene, but drawn from slightly different angles, a tip-off to scholars that one might not be a Rembrandt. Ms. Hendrix says the master would often join his students in drawing exercises—but of course would have a slightly different view, depending on where he was standing. Two drawings titled "A Quack and His Public" roughly sketch a snake-oil salesman putting on a show for a street crowd. For years they were both thought to be Rembrandts, but the one painted from a side view shows a defined emotion in the charlatan's face, while student Gerbrand van den Eeckhout has drawn the man from behind, with no expressions on faces in the crowd, Ms. Hendrix says.

Further confusing the matter is that some drawings even feature corrections done by Rembrandt himself, or lines drawn to show students what they should have done.

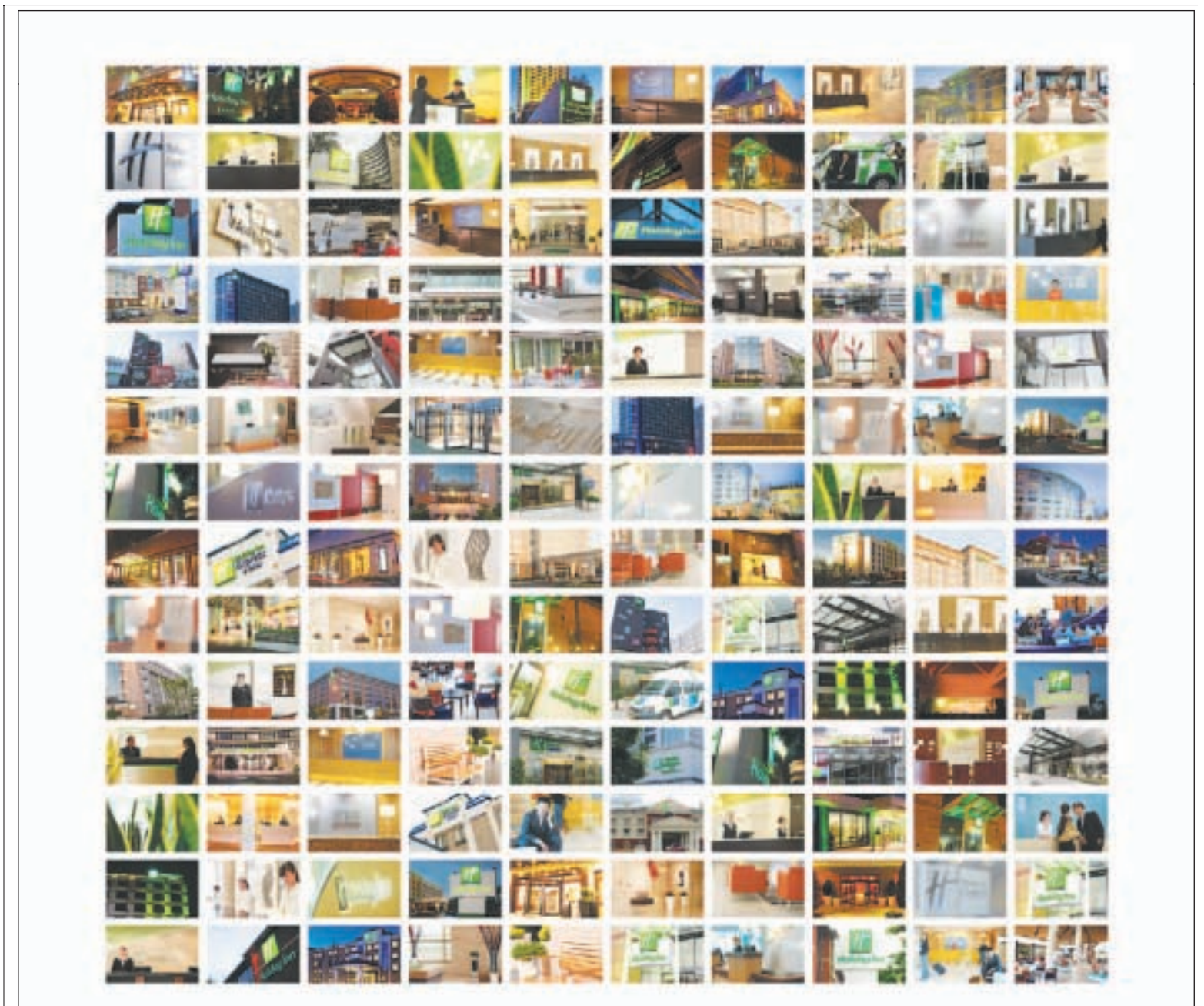
The exhibition is one of several devoted to the artist's work opening soon in Southern California. On Jan. 9 a show featuring Rembrandt prints will open at the Hammer Museum in L.A. On Jan. 22, the Timken Museum of Art in San Diego opens a show focusing on Rembrandt's New Testament prints from the 1650s. The Getty show won't travel: The drawings are too delicate.

Ms. Hendrix says that even though scholars generally agree that the drawings designated as Rembrandts in the Getty show are legitimate, "in the end, it is always hypothetical."



Which drawing is Rembrandt's? Look for bold shadowing and light; depth and definition; focus on the face. (The sketches on the left are his.)

Clockwise from top left: The British Museum, London; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Museum of the Lubomirski Princes, Wrocklaw, Poland; Chatsworth Settlement, Bakewell, England



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Rachel Rillo for The Wall Street Journal

THE COLLECTOR:

Benedicto Cabrera

The Filipino artist on Filipiana and his 'Sabel'

By Alexandra A. Seno

Visitors strolling the grounds of Benedicto Cabrera's home will get a quick view of some of the Filipino painter's passions: Plants, sculpture and other remnants of the culture of the northern Luzon region pepper his four-hectare spread in Baguio.

Some recent additions to the landscape, such as the bonsai in the garden and carp in the pond, are gifts from admirers hoping to move up the long waiting list of buyers for the work of BenCab, as the famous painter is also known.

The artist's new compound, completed earlier this year, includes three contemporary-style concrete and glass structures. There's a hangar-like painting studio—neat, yet filled with books and small random objects. Across from it is the cottage Mr. Cabrera, 67 years old, shares with his partner, Annie Sarthou. And a few steps away, his extensive collection of contemporary Filipino artworks and tribal art sits displayed in a personal museum that is open to the public. An inveterate collector, Mr. Cabrera says he no longer knows how many pieces he owns.

"With collecting you learn," says the perpetually curious artist.

Named a National Artist by the Philippine government in 2006—the highest recognition given to Filipinos who have made significant contributions to the development of Philippine arts—Mr. Cabrera owns hundreds of archive-worthy antique materials on the Philippines, including maps and books and old photographs. Some have inspired his paintings, which are prized for their draftsmanship and reflections on Filipino identity. He also owns one of the largest collections of Northern Philippine tribal objects as well as hundreds of Filipino works of contemporary photography, painting and sculpture.

"I love looking at them," says Mr. Cabrera. "I find inspiration in them."

One of his most-treasured items is a small wooden model made by Arturo Luz (born in 1926) as a prototype for an outdoor sculpture that now stands in Manila. Mr. Cabrera first spied the miniature—a modern interpretation of a tribal god called an *anito*—in the early 1970s, when he visited the London home of Jaime Zóbel de Ayala, then the Philippine ambassador to the United Kingdom. Mr. Zóbel, whose family company commissioned the work, noticed Mr. Cabrera's interest in the Luz maquette and gave it to him.

Born in Manila, Mr. Cabrera trained at the fine arts department of the University of the Philippines. He moved to London in the 1970s, after meeting and marrying an Englishwoman; they had three children, now grown. He returned to his homeland in 1986, after a divorce, and settled in Baguio, a mountain retreat about a six-hour drive north of Manila.

His children, who live in Europe and the U.S., visit him once a year. They share his love for his collections and art. "The middle one, Mayumi, shifted to art now," he says. "She used to model and was taking psychology. But she has been drawing and now taking fine arts in Los Angeles."

Mr. Cabrera's own art keeps him busy. He recently had an exhibition at the Andrew Shire Gallery in Los Angeles. Some of his work is part of the Singapore Art Museum's exhibition "Thrice Upon a Time: A Century of Story in the Art of the Philippines," which runs until Jan. 31. Mr. Cabrera also is preparing for a one-man show of his drawings at his museum next year. And in June, he'll begin his second artist-in-residency at Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

Why do you have a museum as part of your home?

I want to put some of my things in a proper setting. I was inspired by some artists in Bandung [Indonesia]. But I want to display other things aside from my own work for people to admire, so I have tribal art and contemporary art.

When did you begin collecting?

I started collecting comics when I was young. When I got into the arts, I could not afford to buy books so when I used to come across articles on the arts in a magazine, I would cut it and then have it all book bound. It was a good reference. When I started to make money, in the 1960s, I was introduced to *santos* [statues of saints that date from the country's time as a Spanish colony, 1565-1898]....Maybe it was my affinity to sculpture that made me collect santos.

When I got married we traveled. We went to India, Kathmandu and I started collecting Oriental things like *thangkas* [Buddhist painted or embroidered artworks] and Buddhas. In the 1970s, when I was living in London, we started dealing in these things....We rented a stall in a flea market. This is where I met other collectors and I started concentrating on Filipiniana. Then you could get maps of the Philippines for cheap. My first map I got in Rome for a dollar. Now it is worth about 35,000 pesos ($755). It dates from 1575.

What happened to the santos?

I sold them [in the 1960s and 1970s before moving to England].

Do you miss them?

I do. I wanted to focus on maps, books and prints. I have travel books from as early as the 1630s. When I came back to live in the Philippines, I sold some of my maps to start life again....I was forced to sell because I didn't have much money. I have been attracted to Japanese *ukiyo-e*, woodblock prints. I started collecting and

The thumbnail sketch

Home: Baguio, Philippines
Signature style: Figurative paintings that include 'Sabel,' a female vagrant
Next exhibition: A one-man show of drawings at his museum, BenCab, in Baguio, spring 2010
What he collects: Antique maps, books and photographs of the Philippines; Cordillera tribal art; contemporary Philippine art; plants

Above, the artist BenCab, as he is also known, in his studio; right, an old wooden cane from the Cordillera region of the northern Philippines

BenCab's collection includes antique photographs of Cordillera tribespeople, left, and antique maps of the Philippines—this engraving of Manila is from the 1680s.

stopped....The price of the maps went up. You learn, and then you have to part with it sometimes.

How did you build a collection about the Cordilleras (the northern Philippine mountain region with tribal cultures from precolonial times)?

The postcards, photos and maps I came across in London. There were whole albums. These objects I started collecting when I was making money from my paintings, so this was in the late 1980s to early 1990s. But even before that I was already interested. I used to come across nice pieces but I could not afford them in the early days.

What attracts you to Cordillera art?

The sculptural quality and the culture that goes with it. They use [these objects] for rituals. I am also attracted to the patina. You can feel if it is old. In London I met a lot of dealers in tribal art. I was attracted to pieces from Benin and Nigeria. I said, "Filipinos also have tribal art."

Is tribal art-collecting popular in the Philippines?

Yes. There was a good collection that Imee Marcos [Ferdinand and Imelda's eldest daughter] bought. There are a number of collectors. But not everyone likes them. Some, because they are Christian, have to sell because it is considered "idolatry." But for me it is art.

What are your favorites in your collection of works by Filipino masters?

I like the Luz. And the José Joya. The Cesar Legaspi. Early Lee Aguinaldo. Because of the stories behind them and because they were our first abstract paintings. They were done in the 1960s, at the height of abstract expressionism. This was when painters were painting not for buyers. At that time it was hard to sell works. Now many of our artists are [sold] at international auctions.

How did you become interested in the work of younger artists?

The pieces in my collection have some affinity to my work and what I'm interested in. Most of them are figurative. I go to exhibitions, particularly when it's their first, the works are still reasonably priced.

What attracts you aesthetically?

Skill: That is what is missing now. A lot modern art now is mostly conceptual. It is sloppy. I'm old school. I look for good composition...and I like artists who are innovative.

Name some young Filipino painters you like.

Roland Ventura is very skillful. He just draws so well. Some thought he made digital prints because his work is so fine. Elmer Borlongan paints from memory. He doesn't base it on photographs, which a lot of artists do now. Even I do it sometimes. I also like Mark Justiniani.

And photography?

I love photography. When I worked as a layout artist for [Manila's] Sunday Times magazine in the early 1960s, I got my first camera. Romy Vitug is in his 70s now. He's a cinematographer but he is very good at photography. I learned techniques from him, he learned composition from me. I like Emmanuel Santos and his narrative approach to photography. He uses a traditional film camera. I also have a collection of 60 pictures by [the late Filipino photographer] Eduardo Masferré. He was selling them as postcards. I used to buy them for 2.50 pesos (about 13 cents) and they are original photos. Now reproduction prints are $300. He made images of the [indigenous Filipino] tribes in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Why are you purchasing some of your old paintings?

There was a time when I could not afford to keep my own work. I don't have any early work of my own. It was a struggle before, so I was able to buy a few back recently.

One you bought back was an early painting of a "Sabel," a female figure draped in rags. What does Sabel represent?

Sabel started as a symbol of the oppressed and conditions of the country where we have a lot of poor people. In the beginning, she was social commentary. I've used it to make a very Japanese style or almost abstract. It became my icon.

Why do you like plants?

In London I had very little space. With bonsai you can have many trees in one small space. You can bring it in and admire it. I train it and all that. I make the time. But now I have a forest so I don't add bonsai anymore....One collector realized I like bonsai. So he said: "I'll give you bonsai from China." He gave me 14. Wow. It's the Filipino *utang na luob*, where you have to return the favor. He got two paintings last year.

Alexandra A. Seno is a writer based in Hong Kong.

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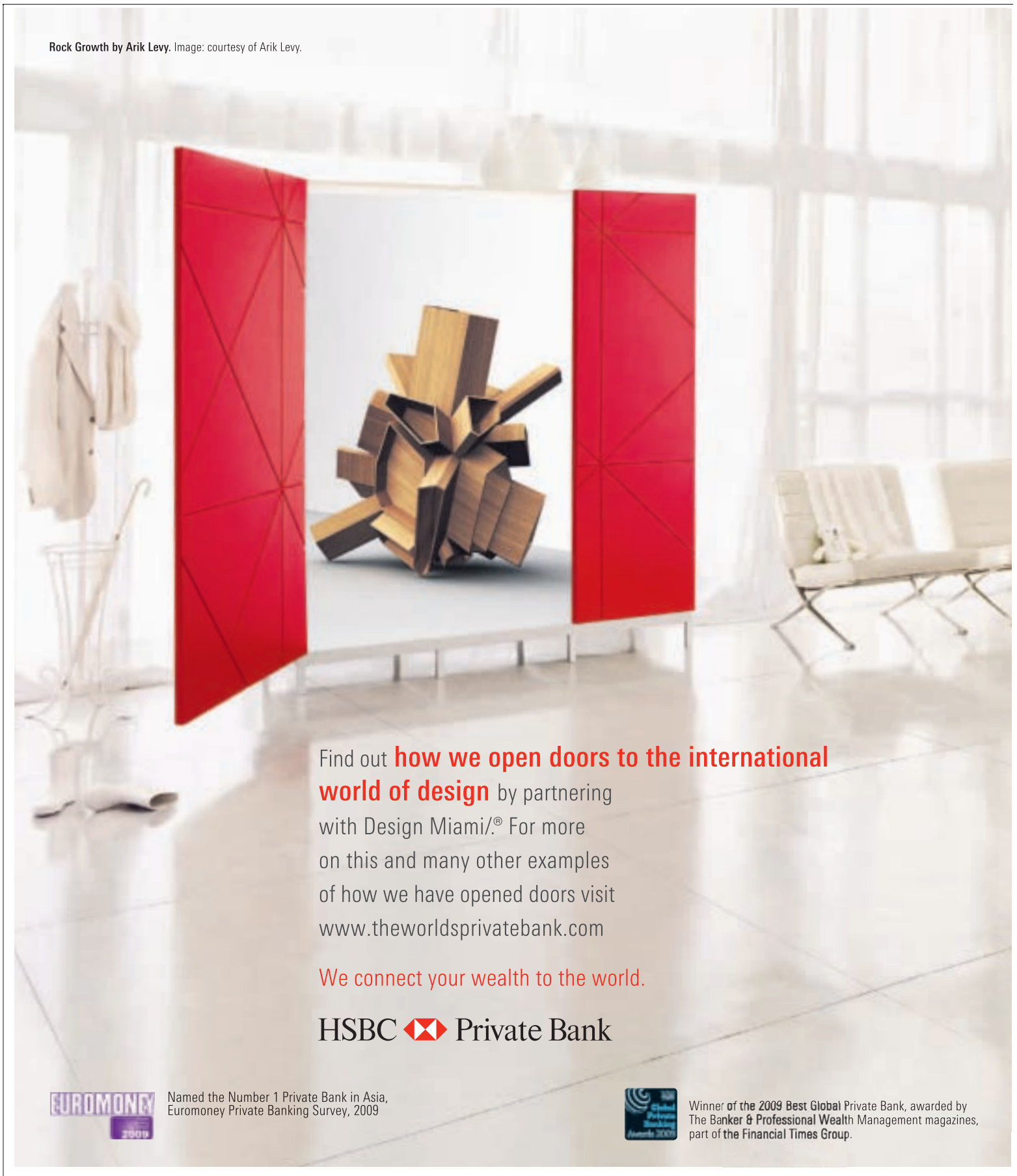
▶ To see more of BenCab's collection, click on **Asia.WSJ.com**.

Rock Growth by Arik Levy. Image: courtesy of Arik Levy.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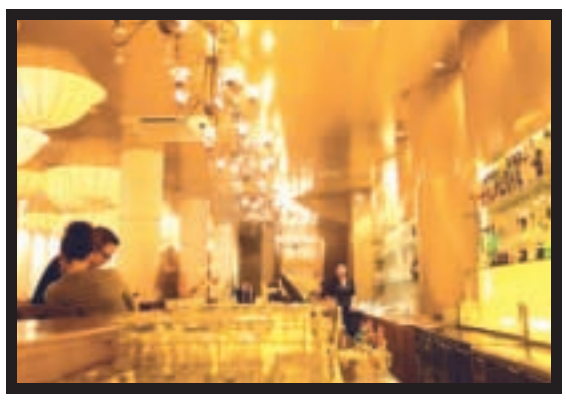
AFTER HOURS:

HO CHI MINH CITY

Vietnam's commercial capital changes character at night

By Samantha Coomber



Na-Son Nguyen for The Wall Street Journal

Clockwise from left, Xu Bar is the place to go for a Martini whose olive is stuffed with blue cheese; the Hotel Majestic's M Bar is the place to go for a sweeping river view; Crazy Buffalo is the place to go after 2:30 a.m.

During the Vietnam War, Saigon, South Vietnam's capital and the nerve center of U.S. military operations, was also the venue for GI's R&R revelry.

The city has never quite recaptured the legendary wildness of that era. Still, while it may be business-obsessed—Vietnam's artistic and cultural hub is Hanoi—nightlife remains a main attraction of Saigon, now officially Ho Chi Minh City but widely called by its former name.

Indeed, the city really comes into its element after dark, when it seems the entire population comes out into the cooler air to play, eat and relax. Enjoying boom times, Saigon offers a new generation of stylish bars, clubs and restaurants, fueled by international visitors—including overseas Vietnamese—and expats, plus local nouveau riche. Saigon can be fickle, though, with venues gaining or losing favor suddenly, and dominated by sporadic events like party nights and international guest DJ spots.

Another in a series on ways for a traveler in a strange town to fill the time after the sun goes down

Though the city is Vietnam's largest, with eight million inhabitants, most clubs, bars and restaurants are thankfully concentrated downtown in District One. Many are easily walkable; if not, taxis are readily available and inexpensive. Epicenter and point of reference is Lam Son Square, halfway along the main shopping street Dong Khoi.

Sundowners kick off the evening's proceedings: By 5:30 p.m., make sure you're in prime sunset position, especially in the dry season (November to May). It's all about location, location, location. While several of Saigon's downtown rooftop bars may seem promising, economic development is shifting the cityscape toward glitzy high-rises, which can restrict the view.

One solution is a stroll south down Dong Khoi; just before you reach the Saigon River you'll come to the Hotel Majestic. Built in 1925, one of Southeast Asia's classic colonial hotels, it still radiates Indochina elegance. For sensational river vistas, take the vintage elevator to the eighth floor and the rooftop M Bar. To your right you'll see Vietnam's largest port, from which a young Ho Chi Minh set sail in 1911 for 30 years of global roaming. The sunset show over, you could stay on for cocktails in the refined lobby Catinat Lounge.

Back up on Lam Son Square, the five-star Caravelle hotel dominates; the 10th-floor rooftop bar in the original wing was "center of operations" for war correspondents. The outdoor terrace of this legendary watering hole, now called the Saigon Saigon Bar, offers wide-angle views and cozy verandas (superb for viewing the sun's dying rays or twinkling skyline), along with multinational beers and cocktails strong enough to obliterate any historical interest. With a fiesta mentality—in part driven by the resident Cuban band (Tuesday to Sunday)—that lasts into the wee hours, the old bar strikes some as cheesy, but who cares?

The Caravelle's newer wing towers over the neoclassical Opera House, French-built in 1899. Take advantage if you have a chance to catch a classical musical performance, a rare cultural treat in this city—and ridiculously inexpensive. The grand interior is a bonus.

Restaurants generally down tools at 10 or 11, so don't put off dinner too long. Eating is Saigon's most popular pastime; the city is Vietnam's culinary capital, and though prices are rising, it's still relatively inexpensive.

The country boasts some of the world's finest street food, but not everyone can stomach dining "local." A great compromise is Quan An Ngon, four blocks north of Lam Son Square. Mock open-air street stalls cook up Southern specialties like *banh xeo* (crispy pancakes stuffed with pork, bean sprouts and shrimps). The recipe of airy colonial villa and authentic fare at great prices (about $2 a dish) draws a huge crowd ranging from ambassadors to locals.

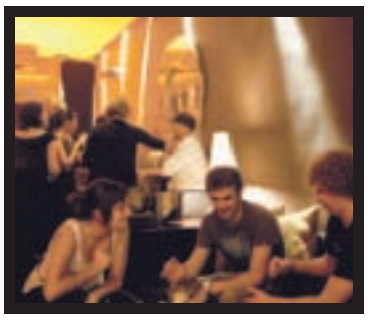
For fine dining, a taxi ride four blocks south brings you to the Temple Club. Once past the lantern-lit entrance, you're in Indochina-era Saigon—this colonial villa, once a guesthouse for Hindu pilgrims, evokes the era with a beautifully preserved interior and vintage objects, the atmosphere underlined by 1950s Chinese love songs. The menu offers refined Vietnamese dishes, like stuffed snails with lemongrass. The Oriental-inspired lounge is de rigueur for predinner tipples.

A five-minute stroll eastward, Warda succeeds in evoking an entirely different atmosphere, with a dazzling Arabian-nights interior, infectious Arabic tunes and a tasty Gulf-Levantine menu that includes the likes of fish and pear tagine. Can this can really be Saigon? Relax predinner under the Bedouin-style canopy out front, sipping a Jelab (date and incense) Martini and even puffing on a *shisha*, or water pipe.

The cocktail set dines at Xu, uber-hip and cooler than your freezer. First, sample divine contemporary Vietnamese cuisine, like seared scallops with green mango-noodle salad, in the sleek lounge-restaurant, then head downstairs to the informal cafe-bar. Upstairs or down, the cocktails are innovative and the Martini olives are stuffed with blue cheese.

With stomachs well-lined, the night's drinking officially begins. Other than Xu, lounge lizards congregate at the nearby Amber Room; this ultra-glam lounge-bar has barely enough room to swing a cat, but sophisticated Basil Martinis and Champagne Cocktails feature big. Comfy sofas and funky vibes encourage unravelling for the city's yuppies. A brief taxi ride eastward along the Saigon River is another chill-out venue: Cage, a stylishly converted warehouse near the waterfront. Cage has morphed into a popular electro club with nightly DJ spots and party nights, but it still manages to attract a slightly more mature (well, over 25) international and local crowd. It's closed Mondays.

You may need your earplugs at Bounce, where guest DJs blast out the latest sounds for young, rich



The Amber Room is heavy on the glam.

and beautiful locals. This glittery club, just up from Lam Son Square, is a sea of intimate tables surrounding a microscopic dance floor. Ordering expensive bottles of whiskey is the norm.

As the night progresses, it's not just the tropical temperatures heating up. There's also the action at eternally glamorous Q Bar, one of Saigon's longest-running, spilling onto the square from its spot below the Opera House. Q Bar outdoes Madonna at keeping up with music trends, with international DJ nights (especially Fridays and Saturdays) and in-house Euro sounds. The loungey, cavernous interiors fill up fast with a cosmopolitan ensemble seeking dancing, conversation and fiendishly sublime cocktails like the Passion Fruit Martini.

And if you aren't ready to call it a night yet, head for the hottest club in town, Lush, a few blocks east. An eclectic mix of locals and foreigners, aided by electro and hip-hop sounds from the DJ crew, lends a party vibe. There's a balcony for those who want to survey the scene (or pose) and a bistro-style eatery out front.

The club Apocalypse Now, two blocks west (or by this stage, a cop-out taxi ride) is almost an institution (and like all good institutions, difficult to escape). It's best in the early-morning hours, jam-packed with a diverse but lively crowd; those seeking a quieter scene can repair to the cramped upstairs bar.

An official midnight curfew for downtown bars and clubs has mellowed somewhat, resulting in variable closing times. Most of the above usually rage on until around 2:30 a.m.; for continued partying, one must head west by taxi to the "backpacker quarter."

There, the spot of choice is grungy GO2: The buzzy pavement bar, pulsating DJ floor and reasonably priced drinks pack 'em in, but "open 24 hours" is the real magnet. A similar but more-ambitious formula is found opposite at Crazy Buffalo—a three-level party zone with a dedicated hip-hop room. Substantial munchies are served throughout the night; at sunrise, fresh staff start dishing up omelets and other breakfast staples.

For a change of scenery, take a taxi back downtown. Cafes, a French legacy, are a huge part of the city's culture, and the homegrown coffee is excellent. At 7:30 a.m., the charming cafe-deli Au Parc starts serving "Serious English Brekkies," or healthier Swiss and Turkish versions. That coupled with a robust latte or two should give you just enough fuel to get you back to your hotel.

Samantha Coomber is a writer based in Saigon.

Amber Room
59 Dong Du St.; ☎ 84-8-6291-3686

Apocalypse Now
2B Thi Sach St.; ☎ 84-8-3825-6124

Au Parc
23 Han Thuyen; ☎ 84-8-3829-2772

Bounce
4/F, Parkson Saigontourist Plaza
35-45 Le Thanh Ton St.
☎ 84-8-3824-8555
Web: www.bounce.com.vn

Cage
3A Ton Duc Thang St.; ☎ 84-8-3910-7053

Caravelle Hotel
19 Lam Son Square; ☎ 84-8-3823-4999
Web: www.caravellehotel.com

Crazy Buffalo
212 De Tham St.; no phone

GO2
187 De Tham St.; ☎ 84-8-3836-9575

Hotel Majestic
1 Dong Khoi St.; ☎ 84-8-3829-5517
Web: www.majesticsaigon.com.vn

Lush
2 Ly Trong St.; ☎ 84-8-3824-2496

Q Bar
7 Lam Son Square; ☎ 84-8-3823-3479
Web: www.qbarsaigon.com

Quan An Ngon
160 Pasteur St.
☎ 84-8-3827-7131

Temple Club
29-31 Ton That Thiep St.
☎ 84-8-3829-9244

Warda
71/7 Mac Thi Buoi St.;
☎ 84-8-3823-3822

Xu
1/F, 71-75 Hai Ba Trung St.;
☎ 84-8-3824-8468
Web: www.xusaigon.com

Clockwise from left, the Temple Club and Warda transport diners to Saigon's past and the Middle East, respectively; if you're still going at 7:30 a.m., it's time for breakfast at Au Parc.

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▶ To see more of Saigon after dark, click on **Asia.WSJ.com**.

BOOK REPORT

Holiday gifts for readers

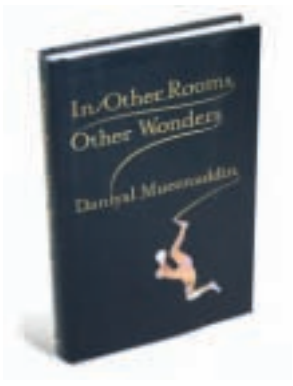
By John Krich

Call it exhaustion at the back end of a bad decade. Call it retrenchment in the face of too many shocks, with too many readers and topics drawn to the Internet. But the slowdown that was noticable last year in what had been an astounding flow of distinguished English-language volumes on Asia continued in 2009. The gush has turned into a trickle of rare browsing finds.

Fortunately, the blizzard of the undistinguished has eased as well. It seems we've all had enough stories of pigtailed innocents with names like Little Sparrow Yang and Bright Teacup Li surviving the terrors of Communism only to endure the horrors of consumerism, and breathless tomes about China becoming the world's richest, most powerful, most dangerous...you pick the superlative. Likewise treatises on India's identity crisis. And perhaps all those coffee-table books full of perfectly lit beach-resort lobbies lose their appeal once you have to think twice about putting coffee on the table.

At a time of such inspirational fatigue, this year's smaller circle of distinction deserves even more to be treasured. For those who find joy in unwrapping a gift book, so solid and blocky, like to flip beautiful designed pages held in one's lap—not displayed on one's laptop—and prefer the smell of fresh ink to the glow of a Kindle, here are a half-dozen works worthy of giving, as well as taking into the next decade.

John Krich is a writer based in Bangkok.

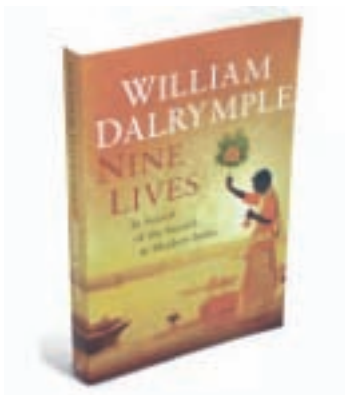


Fiction

In Other Rooms, Other Wonders
by Daniyal Mueenuddin
W.W. Norton, 247 pages, $23.95

It's not often that a jacket flap describes an author as a graduate of Yale Law School currently living on a farm in Pakistan's South Punjab. But one paragraph of Daniyal Mueenuddin's rhythmic, precise and sentient prose leads the rationale for this collection way beyond mere biography.

Except for the pretentious title, there's not a false note in these stories—all linked to the estate of a single feudal overlord, where the lives of poor underlings seem to be told from inner desperation out. In this powerful assertion of fiction's ability to illuminate worlds ignored by headlines, the brief "About a Burning Girl" tells more about corruption than a zillion statistics. Forget cheap exoticism, Muslim exceptionalism or gimmicky plots when it comes to this patient witnessing of loveless—if surprisingly sexy—lives ruled by endless debt (monetary and emotional). Mr. Mueenuddin is for real and so is his Pakistan.



Spirituality

Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India,
by William Dalrymple
Bloomsbury, 284 pages, $21.70

For foreigners, especially the spiritually hungry, India's innumerable holy men, penitents and ritual performers are a source of fascination. "Nine Lives," wrongly billed as a travel book, plucks nine individuals from the shaven-head crowd and, without tiresome judgments or academic interruptions, lets the world know why they have become devotees of what they do (or, more accurately, the many things they don't do, won't touch, can't eat, and so forth).

Mr. Dalrymple is a highly skilled, sympathetic and measured observer; if anything he is almost too matter-of-fact about the extreme forms that pure faith can take. Wealthy daughters who cultivate starvation, an off-duty prison guard turned dancing deity, sex workers framed as fledgling goddesses—he reveals them all with equal respect and without exploiting them for the sake of his own declared "search." Along the way, there are also evocative descriptions of every sort of Indian setting, from the high Himalayas to idyllic Kerala.

Food

Everyday Harumi,
by Harumi Kurihara
Conran Octopus, 192 pages, $33.50

With its requirements for pristine ingredients, hard-to-find condiments and a raft of specialized knives, mats and seaweeds, Japanese cuisine has always seemed the most daunting to try at home. (Unless, of course, you are "average housewife" Harumi—average, that is, apart from having a famous TV-anchorman husband and book sales numbered at 20 million, as the publisher claims). But this attractive British package is designed to ease anyone over the intimidation barrier.

Besides, what other recipe book could be so authentic in minimalist spirit while simultaneously suggesting ways to prepare a ripping barbecue sauce, steak in miso marinade or Japanese-style "mashed potato"? Alternating with softly contented portraits of the author at her mixing bowl are irresistibly simple treats that won't just add to cross-cultural understanding but actually look like they taste great.

Economics

Stephen Roach on the Next Asia: Opportunities and Challenges for a New Globalization,
by Stephen S. Roach
John Wiley & Sons, 414 pages, $39.95

It's hard to believe a book could get through the publication process fast enough to emerge so astoundingly timely. These observations and analyses by chairman of investment bank Morgan Stanley Asia seem barely a blip or a heartbeat from the last downturn, uptick or crisis. His overall thesis, however, is not quite so new: that now is the time for Asian economies to break their export dependence and cultivate the buying power of their own consumers (the 1.8 billion "on the outside looking in" to whom Mr. Roach dedicates his treatise).

Along the way, there's almost too much to digest as these refreshingly honest musings move among such topics as the U.S. Federal Reserve, the forces holding back further Chinese reform and the winners in a "post-bubble world." It's common-sense capitalism almost anyone can follow, tempered with the awareness that, as Mr. Roach puts it, it's not quite time yet to "pop the champagne" on the Asian century.

Politics

Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy,
by Arundhati Roy
Hamish Hamilton, 256 pages, $25

With her instinctive opposition to globalization, Ms. Roy offers a decided contrast to Mr. Roach's corporate perspective. Though she burst onto the literary scene with a cutesy novel, "The God of Small Things," she has since reverted to a muckraking tradition inherited from her mother, a famed Indian feminist. Unfortunately, the results have been largely humorless sermons strictly for the already converted.

In this latest collection, however, Ms. Roy reins in her self-described "feral rant" and aims her barbs effectively. Some references may seem too local—immediate reactions to Indian Supreme Court rulings, for example—but they grow out of a universal question: "What happens when democracy has been...hollowed out and emptied of meaning?" Rising to the defense of workers against multinationals and to persecuted Muslims, Kashmiris and Armenians—even suicide bombers—she shatters the comfortable assumptions of the neoliberal, free-market worldview. References to India as the "world's largest democracy" will never sound quite the same.

Biography

The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the Birth of Modern China, by Hannah Pakula
Simon & Schuster, 787 pages, $35

While we wait for explorations of the palace twists and turns of China's more recent helm-steerers, such as Jiang Zemin, it's fun to traipse back into those almost-quaint days of civil war and skullduggery, before "modern China" turned its attention from raw power to power lunches. And this long account of the 106-year life of the Dragon Lady of anti-Communism (one of the famous, or infamous, Soong sisters) is this year's most enjoyable page turner.

Unfortunately, Ms. Pakula's gossipy read is hobbled at times by her lack of depth in matters Chinese. And it will have to wait for another biographer to unearth just how much her subject—the perfect goodwill ambassador for the Nationalists—really knew about the seamier side of that regime.

Others of note

"English," by Wang Gang (Viking, $24.95), is a classy entry in the "deceptively simple tale of self-awakening" category, which mainland Chinese authors have all to themselves; and "The Unguarded Moment" (Phaidon, $59.55), a greatest-hits collection by National Geographic shooter Steve McCurry, will add sheer color to any life. Its images of South Asia dazzle—despite clearly having required a good deal more stalking (and perfect posing) than the title implies.

ART

The storyteller's art

By Eric Gibson

Four years ago David King, a British journalist, published "The Commissar Vanishes," a remarkable book in which he compared successive versions of official Soviet photographs as one person after another—having fallen out of favor with the ruling elite—was airbrushed out. With "Red Star Over Russia: A Visual History of the Soviet Union From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin" (Abrams, 352 pages, $50), Mr. King has produced an even more ambitious book. It is a kind of semiofficial scrapbook, a history of the Soviet Union told in an unorthodox but vividly revealing way—by means of posters, photographs, paintings, magazine covers, advertisements, book jackets and other ephemera, most of it never before widely seen.

The revolution of 1917 coincided with the fullest flowering of modernism in Russia, with advanced artists such as Vladimir Tatlin and Aleksandr Rodchenko adapting the innovations of Cubism and Futurism to forge their own avant-garde language. This language was, in turn, quickly pressed into the service of the Revolution. Exhibit A in this regard must surely be the photo of the czar's imperial train impounded at Peterhof station in 1917. Next to it, one wall of the station house has been decorated by some anonymous artist with a Cubist-inspired relief incorporating gun barrels, a double-headed eagle falling to the ground (a reference to the royal family's coat of arms) and, painted onto the station house's wooden side, the slogan "The Imperialist War and the Collapse of the Autocracy," a dig at Russian's involvement in World War I.

On a purely documentary level the book is a gold mine, including the series of photographs tracking the construction of Lenin's tomb and more sobering fare, such as the first-ever shot of the exterior of a gulag camp and the mug shots of victims of Stalin's 1930s show trials. By the time you get to Stalin's death at the end of this harrowing work, you're as relieved as you are enlightened. "Red Star Over Russia" is a picture book like no other.

Georges Duby and Guy Lobrichon's "The History of Paris in Painting" (Abbeville Press, 364 pages, $235) is infinitely less unsettling than "Red Star Over Russia" but similar in its mix of aesthetic and documentary purposes. Drawing on paintings from French collections and others, the book shows us how artists have depicted Paris from the 14th century to the 21st.

Since Impressionist paintings have made 19th-century Paris almost too familiar, readers are likely to be drawn to the first two-thirds of the book, where they will discover what the city looked like and what went on there before Claude Monet, Edouard Manet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir fixed it in our memory—and before Baron Haussmann reconfigured the city's streets in the 1850s and '60s. Francois Dubois's 1575 painting of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre records one of the most gruesome incidents of the French religious wars. To anyone familiar with today's built-up, congested City of Light, Pierre-Denis Martin's 1706 painting of Louis XIV and his entourage visiting Les Invalides veterans' hospital and church will come as something of a shock: The domed structure is located in an expanse of countryside.

Beyond the book's documentary interest, "The History of Paris in Painting" is a record of how changing tastes in art can shape what is known to future generations. The decline of history painting in France in the 18th century coincided with the official acceptance of such previously "low" forms as portraits, landscapes, still lifes and genre painting. This is one reason we know more about French daily life during that time—think of Chardin's or Greuze's domestic scenes—than we do about previous epochs in French history.

Calligraphy is often cited as the primary expressive medium of Islamic visual art, and for good reason: With Islam's prohibition on most representational imagery, writing took on decorative and symbolic functions. But as we learn from "Rivers of Paradise: Water in Islamic Art and Culture," (Yale University Press, 384 pages, $85), water, too, has played an important symbolic and spiritual role, not least because of its preciousness in an arid climate. The Koran itself says: "God preferred water over any other created thing."

Edited by Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, "Rivers of Paradise" is a collection of papers delivered at a symposium held in Doha, Qatar, two years ago. Unlike most such collections, this one makes for lively reading. It doesn't hurt, either, that the book is lavishly illustrated. Chapters such as "Images of Water in Islamic Poetry and Gardens" and "Ottoman Water Architecture" provide a comprehensive review of the subject.

We learn, for example, about the importance of fountains in architecture—because water was used for purification before prayers. Some fountains were decorated with a symbolic arch above the spigot, to evoke the gateway to paradise. And form could follow function in the design of water vessels. The exaggerated lines of a beautiful 10th-century ewer, for example—sharply flaring neck and aggressively thrusting spout—were not the products of a craftsman's expressionist impulse but the best way to allow multiple users to drink from the ewer without spreading disease.

And last, a beautiful "coffee-table book" that is also the definitive study of an enduring subject: Rembrandt. Seymour Slive, who should be considered the dean of scholars of 17th-century Dutch art, brings a lifetime of study and erudition to "Rembrandt Drawings" (Getty Publications, 260 pages, $49.95). The book is divided into subject headings such as "Self-Portraits," "Landscapes" and "Life of Women and Children" and is filled with superb reproductions.

Any writer on Rembrandt faces a stiff challenge—not just adding something fresh to an already vast realm of scholarship and criticism but, perhaps most daunting of all, making us tear our eyes away from the images to read the prose. But Mr. Slive is more than up to the challenge. Here he is on "Old Man with Arms Outstretched" (1628) in the Dresden Museum: "The Dresden drawing is a study of expressive movement and gesture executed with furious, speedy chalk strokes. Intense light obscures forms on the right. There was no need to render the old man's features or his feet. It was the tilt of his virtually bald head and upper torso and his outstretched hands that were important. A spot of shadow on the left side sets the figure in space." You would have to go a long way to find a better guide than Mr. Slive—to understanding Rembrandt and his art.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Words and pictures

By Richard B. Woodward

Despite a murderous year for the publishing industry, artful books of photographs continued to roll off the presses in impressive numbers. Electronic devices simply can't match (so far) the substantial pleasure of looking at—and owning—pictures on a paper page. Here are some highlights.

"We English" by Simon Roberts (Chris Boot, 56 pages, $60). Most of us experience nature along pathways and shorelines trodden for decades, if not centuries. This rueful truth is known in the bones of the English, who have pieced and parceled their half of an island since the Bronze Age. Simon Roberts gently mocks his compatriots as they search for weekend inspiration in these well-groomed landscapes, even as he reminds us why such lovely places were, and still could be, wellsprings for poetry.

"Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans" (Steidl, 506 pages, $75). This mammoth catalog is a tribute to Robert Frank's lacerating classic, "The Americans." Published a half-century ago, the Swiss émigré's deeply emphatic and critical examination of his adopted country has only improved with age. "Looking In" offers dozens of Frank's outtakes, as jagged and tough as the 83 pictures that he included in the original book. If you can afford it, buy the hardcover edition of "Looking In," since the paperback inexplicably deletes many of the smaller images that accompany the superb essays.

"Small Trades" by Irving Penn (Getty Museum, 269 pages, $49.95). The final book overseen by the late and inimitable Mr. Penn collects more than 200 portraits of tradesmen and women taken in 1950-51 in Paris, London and New York. A tip of the cap from one exceptional craftsman to his fellow workers, this salute also eulogizes professions—tinsmith, charwoman, iceman, pickle salesman, organ grinder—that would soon be obsolete.

"Playing With Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage" by Elizabeth Siegel (Yale University Press, 200 pages, $45). Photocollage was invented not long after photography. Aristocratic women in Victorian England were notably keen on cutting up photographs of humdrum realism and mixing and matching them to create whimsical fantasies—for example, photos of children nestled in the blooms of painted flowers or a drawing of a juggler tossing balls decorated with portrait photographs of sober, bearded Englishmen. Ms. Siegel's expert commentary on her selection from family albums of the 1860s and 1870s leads us on a twisty ride down the rabbit hole.

"Faces of the Frontier: Photographic Portraits From the American West 1845-1924" by Frank Goodyear III (University of Oklahoma Press, 181 pages, $45). Myths about the American frontier persist despite the best efforts of historians to disprove them. From the archives of the National Portrait Gallery, Mr. Goodyear has culled a wild bunch of characters—Gen. Winfield Scott ("Old Fuss and Feathers"), Levi Strauss, Calamity Jane, Sam Houston, Geronimo and even Hollywood cowboy Tom Mix—who left their imprint on our image of the West. As photographs often show, most of these men and women looked quite ordinary, which makes their star billing in our imagination all the more interesting to ponder.

"Legacy: The Preservation of Wilderness in New York City Parks" by Joel Meyerowitz (Aperture, 209 pages, $65). Who knew that the five boroughs had so many parks, encompassing 11,735 hectares of greenery? In his systematic tour of what is left of the city's natural landscape—and where it is even being enhanced, thanks to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's campaign to plant a million trees—Mr. Meyerowitz uncovers odd and charming hideaways that most native New Yorkers will not have visited or even heard of. Particularly striking are the images of North Brother Island, acquired by the city's parks department in 2007. The five-hectare island in the East River has clearly been reverting to the wild—vines seem to be pulling a power station down into the ground—since the 1963 closing of Riverside Hospital.

"Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before" by Michael Fried (Yale University Press, 409 pages, $55). The latest art historian to discover that photography offers challenges not found in the other arts, Mr. Fried trains his lucid mind and prose on the work of Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth and other contemporary figures. The knotty arguments here call for a reader's undivided attention, but they reward it.

"Sawdust Mountain" by Eirik Johnson (Aperture, 143 pages, $50). A permanent mist hangs over the inhabitants of a region Mr. Johnson calls Sawdust Mountain, and it isn't just the rainy climate. In his moving group portrait of a community of loggers and fishermen in the Pacific Northwest, Mr. Johnson, a native son, documents the precariousness of life in this corner of America. At the same time, his photographs capture the defiance of those who have made certain choices—rural solitude instead of an urban economy—and are content (or not) with that bargain.

"The Photographs of Homer Page" by Keith F. Davis (Yale University Press, 144 pages, $50). One of the best-printed books of the year restores to public view one of mid-century America's unjustly forgotten photographers. Page was a humanist in the style of Helen Levitt, with a similar eye for the ballet of the street. This tasty selection of his New York work from 1949-50 whets the appetite for a full retrospective.

"The Contact Sheet" by Steve Crist (Ammo Books, 192 pages, $39.95). Before the digital era, contact sheets preserved a photographer's thought process and were a graveyard for burying mistakes. The strips here reveal how an illustrious group—William Claxton, Nan Goldin, Dorothea Lange, Julius Schulman, William Wegman and others—went about their business. We see a full-page reproduction of a well-known photograph, accompanied by the contact sheets—sometimes with more than a dozen images—from the same session. There is, for example, Claxton's famous 1960s image of a model (his wife) wearing what became known as the first topless bikini, as well as 12 other rejected shots—including some showing her wearing a diving mask pushed up over her forehead. It's not always clear why the photographers chose one picture over another, which only adds to the value of this archival material.

"The Jazz Loft Project: Photographs and Tapes of W. Eugene Smith" by Sam Stephenson (Knopf, 268 pages, $40). From 1957 until 1965, Gene Smith ran one of the hippest jazz scenes in New York out of his Sixth Avenue loft. He obsessively photographed and tape-recorded everything that went on there, from rehearsals for Thelonious Monk's big-band concert at Town Hall in 1959 to all-night jam sessions with Zoot Sims and Roland Kirk. Thought for years to have been unplayable, the tapes—and the photographs—from this lost jazz world have been restored, thanks to Mr. Stephenson's tireless efforts.

"Who Shot Rock and Roll: A Photographic History" by Gail Buckland (Knopf, 319 pages, $40). Ms. Buckland tells a familiar rock-music story but from the perspective of the photographers who attended the concerts or hung out in the hotel rooms. Blessedly, she makes no attempt to inflate celebrity portraiture into High Art. Though the musicians pictured, from Elvis Presley in 1955 to Amy Winehouse in the present day, are what you'd expect, the line-up of photographers is anything but the usual suspects. Yes, we find Jim Marshall, Lynn Goldsmith and David Gahr but also Dennis Hopper, Andreas Gursky, Ari Marcopolous and others not solidly embedded in rock culture.

"Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard" by Jeff L. Rosenheim (Steidl, 407 pages, $65). The huge collection of postcards—9,000 of them—owned by photographer Walker Evans was in keeping with this lifelong pack-rat's affection for many things looked down on by the high-minded. Mr. Rosenheim's delightful catalog for a show of the postcards at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York explores the many relationships, direct and indirect, between these commercial images—of hotels, parks, lighthouses and much more—and Evans's supposedly austere photographs. Only a sourpuss could flip open this book and not break into a smile.

Richard B. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Windows on our world

By Lisa Rossi

The present gives us a perspective on the past, not least when it comes to the "built environment"—the man-made world where we live and work. By dint of its sheer tangibility, this world can be observed and judged and measured across time. Dominic Bradbury provides such a viewpoint in "The Iconic House: Architectural Masterworks Since 1900" (Thames & Hudson, 352 pages, $65), an insightful tour of 100 remarkably innovative houses designed during the past century by architects including Frank Lloyd Wright, Frank Gehry and Rem Koolhaas.

The modernity of this collection illuminates just how instrumental the early 20th-century architects were in honing a new vocabulary, one that is second nature to us now. Le Corbusier's 1931 "Villa Savoye"—a stark, white, rectangular structure on stilts, with a flowing, unencumbered interior—was once considered shocking, but such minimalism would hardly cause comment today. The house helped set the tone for a century of radical experimentation, though, one that reached its apotheosis with Ken Shuttleworth's glass, curvilinear "Crescent House" (1997).

In "Next Houses: Architecture for the Twenty-First Century" (Abrams, 256 pages, $50) we can see how the boundaries of design are being stretched further still. Ron Broadhurst's look at 25 residences—designed by established and up-and-coming architects from around the world—is a gorgeously photographed survey that makes one point immediately apparent: Grandeur and elegance needn't be forfeited when a building is made with environmental sustainability in mind. Handsome wood and high-tech materials commingle gracefully in many of these houses, which tend toward bigness but seem ingeniously integrated into their surroundings. This is particularly true of "Casa Tóló," designed by the Portuguese architect Álvaro Leite Siza Vieira. It's a configuration of connected, concrete boxes that appear to be tumbling down a hillside.

Architectural eye-teasers of another sort fill the pages of "Build-On: Converted Architecture and Transformed Buildings," edited by Robert Klanten and Lukas Feireiss (Gestalten, 240 pages, $75). Here, architects have reconceived existing buildings by dramatically altering their exteriors or interiors. Erick Van Egeraat's "Pop Stage Mezz," in Breda, Netherlands, is a former officers' mess transformed by sculptural sheathing into a music hall. In New York, the Manifold Architecture Studio has converted an old synagogue into a crisp penthouse.

It's one thing to create a living space, another to fill it in an appealing way. The challenge for interior designers is balancing the client's desires with their own sensibilities. Abundant examples of how this is done well can be found in "Thad Hayes: The Tailored Interior" (Rizzoli, 240 pages, $55). As though touched by a magic wand, each Hayes-designed room emanates warmth, refinement and subtlety, though the essence of the individual is never lost. Mr. Hayes accomplishes this with a monochromatic palette, a fondness for uncluttered space and a honed sense of style. Peek into any one of these luxurious interiors—an East Side apartment in New York or a 1938 Palm Beach property—and you'll feel like making yourself right at home.

The idea of "interior" design may be applied on a much smaller scale, of course. "Handmade in India: A Geographic Encyclopedia of India Handicrafts" (Abbeville Press, 579 pages, $65), edited by Aditi Ranjan and M.P. Ranjan, takes on the monumental task of examining the eye-popping variety of handicrafts made across India's vast landscape, from Jammu in the north to Kerala in the south, from Gujarat in the west to Jharkhand in the east. The thousands of objects pictured here, and accompanied by detailed notes, include terra-cotta jewelry, leather puppets, wood carvings, bamboo baskets and silver ornaments. The exquisite white-on-white embroidery known as Chikankari—from Lucknow, in north-central India—is just one of the countless delights in this visually stunning display.

It's possible to go smaller still and maintain a striking sense of design, as demonstrated by "Masters of Contemporary Watchmaking" (Thames & Hudson, 292 pages, $85), Michael Clerizo's introduction to 11 of the world's best watchmakers. We may live in the BlackBerry age, but there is something reassuring about knowing that George Daniels, an octogenarian North Londoner, is still practicing a craft that has been around for 500 years. Mr. Daniels's interest in what would become his life's work began at age 5, when he happened to find a pocket watch. He pried it open, naturally, and beheld the movement's orderly, interlocking pieces.

"It was self-contained and made no demands," he tells Mr. Clerizo. The boy was hooked, and the man remains an extraordinary craftsman of timepieces that embody practical beauty. The author's literary portraits of these watchmakers are intimate and appealing—but equally compelling are the photographs of the mechanical marvels that these engineer-artists have designed.

Just as watchmakers have spent centuries trying to capture time, mapmakers have long dreamed of corralling space. "Mapping the World: Stories of Geography" (Firefly Books, 188 pages, $39.95), by Caroline and Martine Laffon, excavates the history of cartography with enticing examples from a wide variety of places and eras. The 87 maps shown here include a childlike painting of the sea, earth and sky by a 13th-century Franciscan monk in England and an elaborately detailed 17th-century Japanese map of shimmering blue waterways. Near the book's end, we're treated to an image that cartographers once could only dream of: a satellite view from space of the Earth's green and blue surface—but showing hardly a trace of the man-made marvels that lie below.

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An Ottoman revival

Istanbul restaurants rediscover an imperial cuisine

By J.S. Marcus

Istanbul

Elegant restaurants along the Bosphorus prepare fish beautifully and plainly, in a Mediterranean style similar to that of Italy or Greece. In Beyoglu, Istanbul's nightlife hub, tables are cluttered with tavern food in tapas-like portions. It's all delicious, of course—and a little familiar.

But when you encounter a delicate rice pilaf flavored with clarified butter, or a perfect slice of baklava, the dozens of pastry layers dissolving one by one on the tongue, it's a reminder that Istanbul is home to another cuisine, one as complicated and sophisticated as contemporary Turkish food is simple and sustaining.

The cuisine of the Ottomans, whose empire once stretched from Baghdad to Budapest, was perfected in Istanbul in the 15th and 16th centuries in the kitchens of Topkapi Palace, home of the sultans for 400 years. Ottoman control of the spice trade was at its peak, and the cuisine's hallmark is its deft mixing of sweet and savory flavors. Today, dishes such as delicately stuffed Black Sea mackerel and sea bass flavored with mastic, an aromatic resin usually reserved for desserts, are appearing on menus at some of the best restaurants. A chef in the classical Ottoman period might have devoted his whole working life to one dish; modern-day chefs have special training and often base their interpretations on archival research.

The cuisine's revival comes as many people in Istanbul are becoming more interested in their Ottoman heritage. The flowering of Ottoman restaurants is among the most visible results.

In September, a contemporary take on Ottoman cooking came to Topkapi Palace, with the opening of Karakol restaurant, just inside the palace gates in a meticulously restored guardhouse. "Turkish isn't Ottoman," says Vedat Basaran, co-owner of Karakol, where glass-and-silver chandeliers glitter over polished blond-stone floors. For dishes like pilaf and kebab, he says, "we use the same names but the techniques are different."

For example, modern Turkish kebabs are usually composed of lamb pieces roasted on a metal skewer. Traditional Ottoman kebabs could have been made with lamb, rabbit, duck or pigeon, often skewered on flavor-enhancing eggplant stalks. Karakol serves duck-breast kebabs with an almond-humus foam, recalling *tarator*, a traditional Ottoman sauce of ground nuts and lemon. At Mr. Basaran's Feriye Lokantasi restaurant, set right on the Bosphorus, the skewers are rosemary stems.

Mr. Basaran anticipated the Ottoman revival back in the 1990s when he opened Tugra, a groundbreaking Ottoman-style restaurant in the opulent Ciragan Palace Kempinski hotel overlooking the Bosphorus. One of his most celebrated rediscoveries was the addition of dried cherries to stuffed grape leaves, giving the dish a lush, unexpected tartness.

Some traditional aspects can't be authentically replicated, Mr. Basaran notes. The "perfume" of Ottoman dishes often came from rare ingredients like deer musk and ambergris, an aromatic whale secretion.

Priscilla Mary Isin, an English-born translator and food historian who has lived in Turkey since the 1970s, says Ottoman cuisine in its heyday reflected a society that was officially Muslim yet encompassed a range of religions and ethnicities. The empire's governors returned to the palace with recipes from provinces on three continents. "That's why the cuisine is so marvelous," Ms. Isin says. "It's a big synthesis." It was also "a fine cuisine of the elite," who could afford an endless supply of manpower, she notes.

Topkapi Palace was constructed on a bluff over the Bosphorus starting in the 1460s. A series of low-lying structures almost like a nomadic encampment rendered in stone, it makes for a "very modest impression," says Ilber Ortayli, head of the Topkapi Palace Museum. "Our palace is very beautiful, but it is not as magnificent as European palaces."

Kerem Uzel/Redux Pictures for The Wall Street Journal

Tugra, above, in the Ciragan Palace Kempinski hotel; Karakol's baklava appetizer with mastic-flavored seabass; left, Feriye Lokantasi

What did astonish visitors was the display of material wealth. Ottoman textiles were sable-lined and brocaded with precious metals. Food was served on Chinese porcelain. The main courtyard was the setting for lavish banquets, with thousands of guests dining on dozens of courses that were extravagant even by the standards of Western European royalty.

Europe's palace kitchens often were hidden, but the Ottomans' master architect, Mimar Sinan, made the Topkapi kitchens some of the palace's most conspicuous structures. Viewed from the Bosphorus, the kitchens' 20 chimneys are like European cathedral spires. Banquets were held in the vast loggia of the second courtyard but meals also were served in resplendent interiors, such as the imperial hall of the harem, decorated with imported Dutch tiles and Venetian glass, or the intimate "fruit room" lined with elaborately decorated panels.

In 2010, Istanbul will be one of Europe's "Capitals of Culture," along with Pecs, Hungary, and Essen, Germany. The year will be marked by infrastructure projects and cultural events, including the Topkapi kitchens' reopening in late 2010, Mr. Ortayli says.

Food at Topkapi wasn't just something to eat, says Gulru Necipoglu, Harvard University's Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture. It had political significance, representing the "generosity of the dynasty." Ottoman cuisine's popularity is a sign of "neo-Ottomanism," she says, a "nostalgia" for the empire's cosmopolitan past.

According to Jason Goodwin, author of mystery novels set in 19th-century Istanbul that are popular with Turkish readers, the popularity of Ottoman cuisine is "very encouraging." (His fictional detective, Yashim, is an expert cook who excels at dishes like *imam bayildi*, "the imam fainted," slow-cooked eggplant stuffed with tomato, onion and garlic.)

The cuisine's return, Mr. Goodwin says, allows Turks to "look at themselves in a more robust way."

Trip planner

Where to stay

Few hotel openings have been as eagerly awaited as the reopening of the Pera Palace hotel, set for spring 2010. It first opened in 1892 as a hostel for travelers on the Orient Express. The two-year, $29 million restoration will leave many belle-époque furnishings intact, including a wood-cabin elevator. Suite 101 is a museum honoring Kemal Atatürk, father of the Turkish Republic, who strategized there in the last days of the Ottoman Empire (☎ 90-212-222-8090; www.perapalas.com; rates unavailable).

Istanbul residents shop north of the Golden Horn in Beyoglu and along the Bosphorus, but most of the tourist sites are to the south, in Sultanahmet. Along a hotel-lined street beneath Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque, a midpriced standout is the Darussaade Hotel, in a pastel-painted 19th-century wood mansion; rooms are furnished in a late-Ottoman style (www.darussaade.com; double rooms, $120 to $168).

What to do

The Archaeology Museum, tucked in a remote corner of the Topkapi Palace grounds, is widely considered one of the best of its kind, rich in antiquities unearthed throughout the Middle East (nearly all of which was—at some point—under Ottoman control). The collection's signature work is the Alexander Sarcophagus, from the 4th century B.C., with marble carvings depicting scenes from the life of Alexander the Great (www.kultur.gov.tr).

Five centuries after its mosque-building spree, Istanbul can't stop building shopping malls, especially in the new districts on the European side. Kanyon, opened in 2006, isn't the largest, but it is the most visually arresting, with swirling architectural elements creating a canyon of open space. Walk across a gangplank into an adjoining sphere to catch a movie (www.kanyon.com.tr).

Port of call

Why the 2003 vintage is a great choice for a present

By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Andrew Scrivani for The Wall Street Journal

We know there aren't really any can't-miss presents. Over the years, we have given far too many sure-fire winners that were apparently forgotten before the wrapping paper was thrown away. That said, with time short before you simply must finish your holiday shopping, here's an idea that's pretty close to can't-miss: a bottle of Vintage Port from 2003.

Wine lovers will appreciate the gift for its thoughtfulness because Vintage Port is so special. People who have never had a real Vintage Port will appreciate the gift because they've probably always wondered what it's like. And here's the part you don't have to tell them: There are some tremendous sales on Port these days.

Many wines from all over the world are called Port, which usually means simply that they are sweet and alcoholic. Real Port comes from the Douro region of Portugal and while there are many kinds of real Port, from Tawny Port to Late-Bottled Vintage Port, the most special Port is Vintage Port (which says Vintage Porto on the label). It is made from various grapes, such as Touriga Nacional, and then is fortified with brandy, which stops the fermentation and leaves the wine with plenty of residual sugar and a lot of alcohol (around 20%). It is usually bottled about two years after the harvest and is intended to have a long, long life in the bottle.

Not all years are good enough to be generally declared a vintage year by most Port houses. As it happens, 2003 was one of those really good years and so was 2007. Do the math and you will see that the 2007 wines are just reaching shelves now. And one good thing about the 2003 wines is that, while still quite young in Port terms, they have a little bit of age on them so they are somewhat more accessible than the newborn '07s.

How are they? We bought every one we could find for a broad blind tasting. We paid prices ranging from $26.87 to $100. We tasted them in blind flights over several nights.

Because Port is sweet and alcoholic, you might think you couldn't tell one from another. But, as with any other type of wine, taste Port side by side, against another one or a few others, and you will be amazed how the differences emerge.

Some primarily do taste of sugar and alcohol and therefore seem hot, simple and not very pleasant. But the better ones—ah, the better ones. In these wines, there are some reins on the sweet and alcoholic tastes, so they become complementary rather than overwhelming. There are all sorts of flavors—plums, chocolate, blackberries—but the most notable sense is rich, dark earth. The wines taste grounded and real, with a kind of texture that allows the various tastes to slowly present themselves with each sip.

Especially in youth, they are wines that take a while in your mouth to fully express themselves and, when they do, they're both delicious and fascinating. Even a very small glass of Vintage Port seems to last forever as each tiny little sip coats and warms first the mouth, then the throat and then envelops you like an embrace.

By the way, while we are generally not huge fans of wine and cheese together, Port and Stilton (and other blues) are an exception. They seem to bring out the best in each other and never taste quite as good alone to us as they do together. And here's an idea: Because dry Portuguese reds are increasingly available and very affordable, have one with dinner sometime soon and then have a glass of Port afterward.

The similarities are striking, especially the earthiness. Dottie made a brisket with some of our leftover Port and we ate it with a dry Portuguese red and, well, wow.

The attached index includes our favorites from the tasting, but keep this in mind, too: Because Port doesn't sell briskly, some stores have older vintages around that can be fine bargains. Be sure you buy them from a reputable merchant, because you don't want to buy abused wines.

After our tasting of 2003 Ports ended, we opened a bottle from our own cellar—a 1983 Warre's, exactly 20 years older. (We didn't find a 2003 Warre's for this tasting.) It was delicious—so very similar to the wines we had just tasted, but so different, too. And still young, in its own way.

Dottie felt so strongly about the differences that John put a laptop in front of her and asked her to write her thoughts immediately after we'd tasted the older wine.

She wrote: "The older Port had a more relaxed sense to it. The flavors had melded. Some of the younger ones had alcohol that tasted hot. The older one's alcohol seemed better integrated into the whole taste of the wine. The earthiness in the older wine was very similar to the earthiness in the younger wines—that texture thing we discussed—but the sweetness seemed muted, which heightened the earthy/chocolate taste of the older wine. With so many of the younger wines, one glass was plenty. The older wine, as we've found with so many older wines, was far easier to drink. The experience of the older wine registered in my head a lot more, too. It was thought-provoking. The older one was far more thoughtful."

Thoughtful. As it happens, that's what gift-giving is all about, too.

What could be more perfect?

The Dow Jones 2003 Vintage Port Index

In a blind tasting of Vintage Port from 2003, these were our favorites. While the prices listed below are generally representative, we have found them extremely flexible, so shop around. We bought the Quinta do Crasto, for instance, for $26.87, but saw it elsewhere for up to $80; we paid $89.99 for Churchill's, but later saw it on sale for $39.99. These are very young and will age beautifully for decades, but that doesn't mean they can't be sipped now. If you do try one soon, pour a little glass, cork or pump the bottle at the end of the night and it will be fine for at least a couple of weeks.

W. & J. Graham's
$90. Delicious. **Best of tasting.** Everything seems to work in this wine. Dottie talked about its unique mix of power and finesse. It not only has hints of chocolate, but almost a chocolate-like texture, with tremendous earthiness and, despite its weight, a real brightness to it. A Port for Port lovers—or to make a Port lover of anyone.

Quinta do Crasto
$50. Good/Very Good. **Best value.** Absolutely lovely wine, with remarkable drinkability. Soulful and satisfying.

Churchill's
$67. Very Good. Earthy and warm, rich but not thick, with prunes, blackberries, chocolate and a touch of rosemary. Not too sweet, so the flavors really pop out.

Fonseca
$100. Good/Very Good. Particularly lovely nose, with everything in balance—not too much alcohol or sweetness. Well-melded tastes of blackberries and chocolate, with a little bite at the end that's fun and interesting.

Ramos Pinto
$75. Good/Very Good. Interesting texture, with a dryness on the finish that's surprising and interesting—and makes it easy to have another sip. John said it reminded him of good chocolate—very satisfying.

Smith Woodhouse
$59.99. Good/Very Good. Nice, relaxed earthiness, with plenty of chocolate, plums and a hint of green herbs for complexity. Lovely and a bit chewy.

Note: Wines are rated from Yech to OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious and Delicious! Prices vary widely.

Arbitrage

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Paris	€19	$27.64
Rome	€20	$28.35
Kuala Lumpur	99 ringgit	$28.89
Manila	1,349 pesos	$29.19
Bangkok	970 baht	$29.24
Singapore	S$41	$29.33
Shanghai	248 yuan	$36.32
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This Is Your Brain on Music

By Stuart Isacoff

Sometimes, the longer you journey toward a goal, the more it appears to recede into the distance. The experience is common to both alpine mountaineers and scientific researchers—especially, it seems, to those involved in neuroscience. It's a burgeoning field, with new discoveries at every turn. Lately much of its focus has been on the arts, and a spate of best-selling books has hit the marketplace with the promise of unraveling the secret of music's enduring power.

However, an abundance of brain scans, experimental studies and case histories has, in the end, failed to answer certain vital questions: What is music? Where can we find it in the brain? Why does it do what it does to us?

The brain is, in essence, a musical instrument—taking bits of material from a world of chaos, then shaping and modulating them into one graceful, lyrical stream. Yet, despite some scientific success in mapping its discrete compartments, it is an organ that resists efforts to render its workings in black and white. Cognition involves processes that are simply too wide-ranging and complex to be assigned to a single anatomical location.

Scientists have had to grapple with this, as well as with what is known as "plasticity." At a recent conference on "Emotion, Music & the Brain"—held at the State University of New York's Purchase College Conservatory of Music in Westchester in collaboration with the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function at the Bronx's Beth Abraham Hospital—Concetta Tomaino, Beth Abraham's vice president of music therapy, explained the phenomenon: "Simply put, the brain changes as it experiences and learns." In effect, those attempting to pin down its internal circuitry are chasing a moving target.

Yet, the plasticity that reshapes the brain as we grow is also a blessing. "The challenge is in knowing how it can change when there is damage," says Dr. Tomaino, "and then working with the neural networks that are still available." This is an area with remarkable success. Steven Sparr, professor of clinical neurology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, demonstrated at the conference that "emotions can utilize alternative pathways when the primary ones are damaged—allowing a patient with facial paralysis, for example, to regain a symmetrical smile in response to humor." Emotions, Dr. Sparr says—and thus music—are integral to human intelligence. "A mind without either is impoverished."

Martin Kozlowski

Inspired by the work of these doctors, I signed up to become a subject myself in an experimental study at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, under the supervision of Preeti Raghavan, assistant professor of rehabilitation medicine and director of the Motor Recovery Laboratory. Dr. Raghavan has done a great deal of work with victims of stroke. But the nature of the new study was especially intriguing to me: How do injured pianists and those without injury differ in their muscular and neural reactions when playing?

Although I don't have any performance-related problems, I have been suffering from a slight shoulder tear, which placed me in the injured group. So one afternoon in October, I sat at a keyboard as Dr. Raghavan's team—graduate students Errold Reid Jr. and Akshay Bhatt, along with Dr. Sravani Mudumbi—placed electrodes on my arms and torso, asked me to slip on a special glove to measure my hand movements, and put me through a lengthy protocol. I followed their instructions, though much of the time I had no idea why I was being asked to do so.

"Listen for the octaves," said Mr. Reid before playing a tape, "and then try to duplicate them exactly." I assumed it was a test of my ability to mimic what I heard with all the subtle nuances of a professional artist. I was wrong. "Play the notes of the scale singly and slowly." "Perform a challenging piece that lasts 10 minutes." "Now listen to the octaves and again repeat them." "Squeeze your shoulder blades together."

A video camera caught it all, for the purpose of observing the way I moved my arm. I was asked to use biofeedback as a relaxation method while holding my hands in a playing posture, and then while playing. Finally, I was shocked with electrical pulses—more than once! I survived.

I met with the team again later to hear the results. "These are all preliminary," Dr. Raghavan warned me. "The study is still ongoing, and I can only give you a very general picture." The octaves, it turns out, were simply used to check on how I held up the three fingers between my thumb and pinky, since they have to be raised above the keys when the motion is performed. Meanwhile, the other electrodes relayed measurements of stretching, contracting, levels of tension and relaxation, and the transmission of information in my body. The glove tracked finger "wobble." The shocks stimulated a nerve while the team watched their effects on distant back muscles.

"We want to know if there are any predisposing factors that might lead some individuals to injury," Dr. Raghavan said. Because my shoulder injury was on my left side, that was the hand and arm the team focused on. The results? My finger muscle activity was good, and my wrists relaxed. But . . . "Your upper trapezius and lower trapezius [muscles] are not behaving the way they do in pianists without injury," she reported. "When certain reciprocal relationships are disturbed, the resulting instability causes other muscles to strain in an attempt to restore balance." My results were a warning sign.

Dr. Raghavan is clearly on to something. Part of her research will involve righting the problems. One of her colleagues, Dr. Richard Frieden, developed insights into the training of back muscles in injured musicians using physical therapy. But as the biofeedback portion of the test showed, another solution may rest in the brain itself, perhaps through visualization and meditative techniques. The research is still young, but it could well confirm truths as ancient as the hills.

Mr. Isacoff is on the faculty of the Purchase College Conservatory of Music (SUNY) and author of "Temperament: How Music Became a Battleground for the Great Minds of Western Civilization" (Knopf/Vintage).

Bookshelf / *By Bret Stephens*

The Siren Call Of Tyranny

"Last Exit to Utopia" was first published in France nearly a decade ago. It concerns itself primarily with the failure of much of the French left to come to grips with the collapse of communism and the exposure of its innumerable crimes. The events and debates under its review date mainly to the 1990s, and its author died in 2006.

Yet the book, at last available in English in this fine translation, ought to command close attention because it was written by Jean-François Revel, who—unlike such *bien-pensant* idols as Jean-Paul Sartre (an admirer of Stalin) and Michel Foucault (a cheerleader of the Ayatollah Khomeini)—deserves to be ranked as the pre-eminent French political philosopher of the second half of the 20th century. What's more, the book's themes continue to resonate today, when murderous ideologies still compete for legitimacy and "enlightened" understanding the Western intelligentsia.

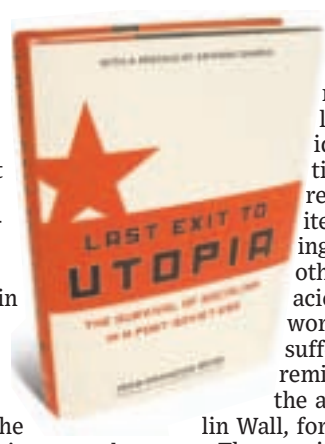
Last Exit to Utopia
By Jean-François Revel
(Encounter, 348 pages, $23.95)

Revel's great subject was totalitarianism, not just its practice but also its intellectual methods, deceits and disturbing psychological attractions. Books such as "The Totalitarian Temptation" (1976) and "How Democracies Perish" (1983), he dissected the mind-set of Western intellectuals who, living in democracies, found much to admire in gulag countries like the Soviet Union and Cuba and much to detest in free ones—the U.S. most of all.

Why was that? "The totalitarian phenomenon," Revel observed years ago, "is not to be understood without making an allowance for the thesis that some important part of every society consists of people who actively want tyranny: either to exercise it themselves or—much more mysteriously—to submit to it."

It was a temptation that proved to be remarkably resilient. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the once fellow-traveling European left had no choice but to admit that the god to which it had long rendered faithful service had been an illusion, and incurably dysfunctional to boot. Yet that grudging concession, as Revel observed, did little to chasten the former groupies of totalitarianism. On the contrary, it served as a springboard for a fresh assault on liberal-democratic principles.

The tipping point, in Revel's view, was the publication in 1997 of "The Black Book of Communism," an 800-page compendium of the serial barbarities of communist regimes from China and Ethiopia to Russia and Cambodia. This massive scholarly undertaking, meticulous in its research and incontrovertible in its findings, was instantly greeted with fury by much of the French intelligentsia, which refused to accept that its own eyes-wide-shut apologetics for the likes of Mao, Mengistu, Stalin and Pol Pot were no less a form of complicity in mass murder than Holocaust denial.



Nor could this same intelligentsia acknowledge that the collapse of communism was the supreme vindication for Cold War anticommunists such as Revel, long reviled as a political paranoid and closet fascist. Instead, the left's new refrain was that, whatever the excesses of communism, they were as nothing next to those of "liberal totalitarianism" and "savage capitalism." Communism, in this view, more than redeemed itself through its aspirations for social justice. And to the extent that actual Communist regimes—namely, all of them—fell short of that ideal, it merely proved that they hadn't been Communist to begin with!

Of this mental fortress, Revel acidly writes: "Utopia is not under the slightest obligation to produce results: its sole function is to allow its devotees to condemn what exists in the name of what does not." Thus the political collapse of communism offered members of the hard left an avenue of ideological resurrection, since they could return to their favorite pastime of lambasting globalization and other American conspiracies to enslave the world without having to suffer any unpalatable reminders of some of the alternatives—the Berlin Wall, for instance.

Then again, this approach, by underscoring the far left's protectionist and xenophobic impulses, also served to expose its historic kinship with the far right. Here Revel instructively reprises the Nazis' profound debt to Marxism (Hitler once described himself as "not merely the vanquisher of Marxism [but also] its implementer") as well as to the anti-Semitic and racist dogmas of Karl Marx. "What is the worldly religion of the Jew?" Marx asked. "Huckstering. What is his God? Money." Communism, according to its founding father, "would make the Jew impossible

Revel's analysis helps to make sense of the latest version of the totalitarian temptation, this time the temptation of radical Islam (though "Last Exit to Utopia" does not explicitly broach the subject). Strange as it may seem, today's Western "progressives," whose domestic political fixations include gay marriage and abortion rights, nonetheless frequently find themselves making common cause with Muslim fanatics for whom such things are anathema.

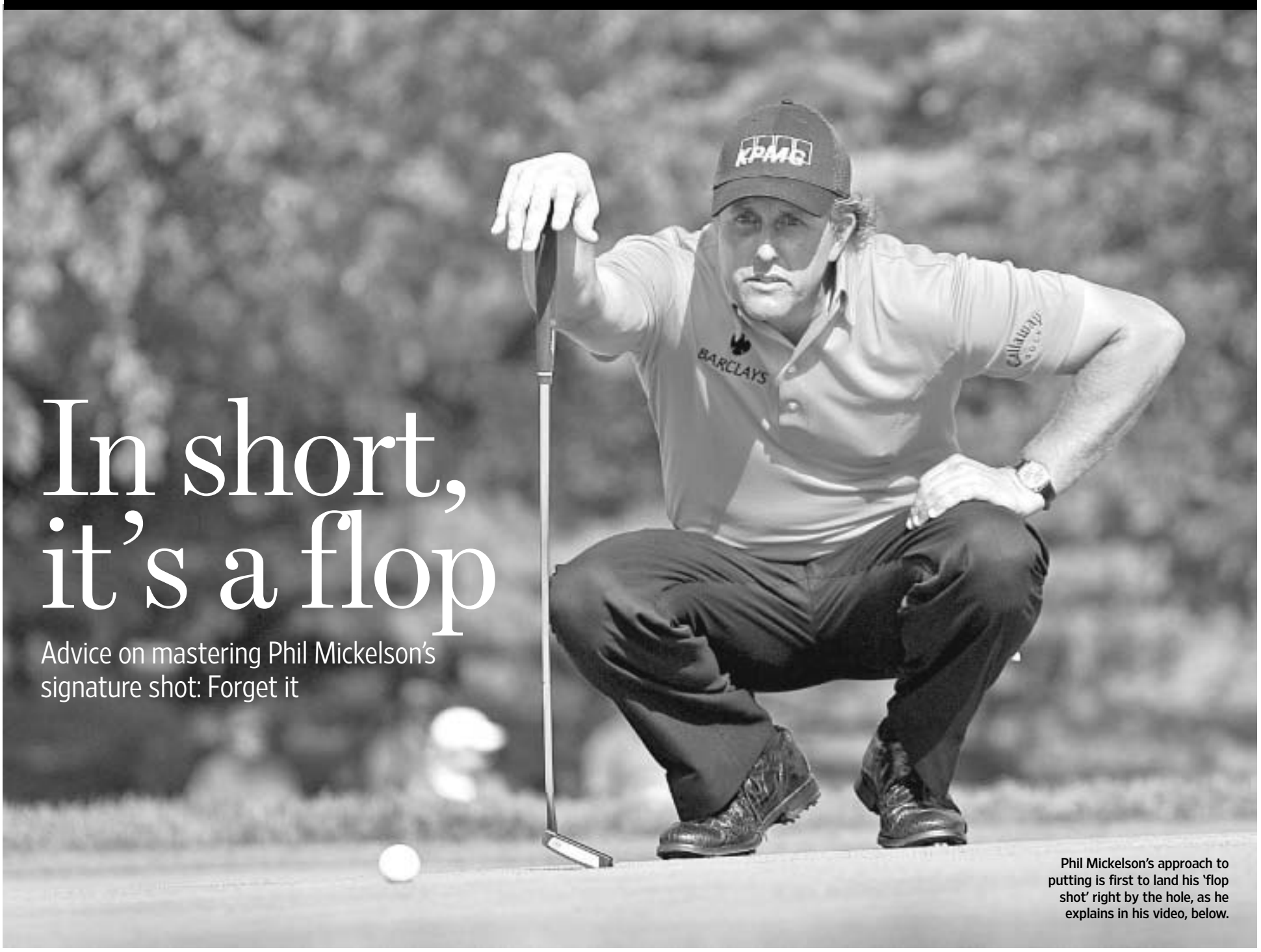
This seemingly strange affiliation has partly to do with a shared loathing, among radical leftists and radical Islamists, of the U.S. and Israel. But as Revel astutely notes, the deeper bond is what he calls the "excommunication of modernity," a mark of the left going back to the primitivist and anti-civilizational musings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The Islamists understand this commonality as well: Among the doctrinal sources cited by Osama bin Laden, one finds not only the Quran but also the works of Noam Chomsky.

Anyone who thinks the totalitarian temptation lies buried in Lenin's mausoleum would do well to read this book, a fitting literary capstone in the career of one of France's true immortals

Mr. Stephens is the Journal's foreign-affairs columnist and a deputy editorial page editor.

In short, it's a flop

Advice on mastering Phil Mickelson's signature shot: Forget it



Phil Mickelson's approach to putting is first to land his 'flop shot' right by the hole, as he explains in his video, below.

Getty Images

Golf Journal
JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

Phil Mickelson, the No. 2-ranked golfer in the world behind you-know-who, has always been most famous for his short game. Invariably it's described as "creative" or "imaginative" for the way he makes chips and short pitches dance, spin, check or roll out as circumstances warrant—and sometimes even when circumstances don't warrant. Once at the AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am, when his ball lay on a downslope above a bunker, he turned to face away from the green and hit the shot backward, over his shoulder, onto the putting surface.

The standard wisdom in short-game instruction is to chip or pitch the ball so that it lands on the green as close to the edge as possible and runs the rest of the way to the hole. For most players that's a much safer approach than the airborne shots Mr. Mickelson is known for. His signature shot is the flop, which shoots practically straight up off the clubface and lands softly, like a butterfly with sore feet (as they say), but requires a big, scary swing to produce.

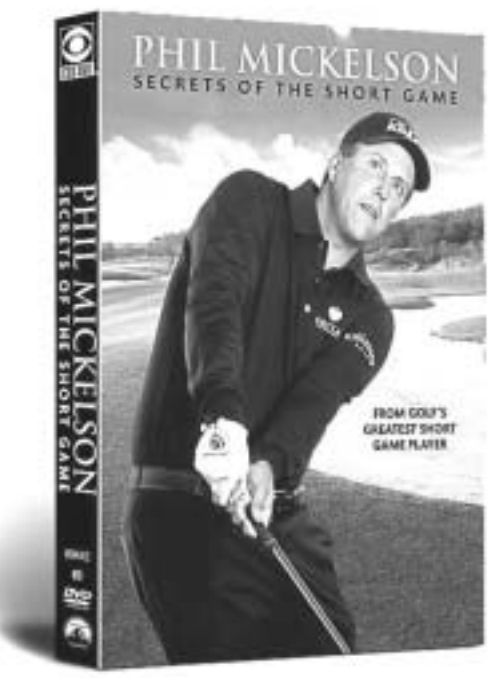
Mr. Mickelson acknowledged in a telephone interview that choosing the low, running shots is "not a bad rule of thumb" for most golfers. But not for him. "I've always practiced those shots a lot, so I feel comfortable relying on them in competition. I've pulled off some very big, important lob shots in tournaments, which is why I've been identified with that shot. Probably rightly so," he said.

In his first-ever instructional book and DVD (sold separately), called "Secrets of the Short Game," Mr. Mickelson demonstrates how to hit his entire repertoire of short-game shots, including that backward circus trick. Naturally, he makes it all look easy, and his explanations are for the most part crystal-clear. But that doesn't mean that everyone will be able to master them, especially people who didn't grow up with a backyard chipping green as Mr. Mickelson did.

The flop shot is almost impossible for mere mortals. We learn in the book and DVD that it is not at all the same thing as the much easier lob shot. One hits the latter when the ball is sitting up in the grass; the clubface, opened to create extra loft, slices into the ball directly with only minimal interference from the grass. The flop shot, by contrast, can be used when the ball rests on tightly mown turf. The clubface, also open, smashes into the ground well behind the ball, penetrates the turf and "bounces" back upward from beneath the ball, sending it on a very high arch. This is done with a full swing, so blading the ball 50 yards over the green is a real possibility. To develop the confidence necessary to deploy this shot in a clutch situation would require, by my estimate, 20 years of constant practice, plus hypnosis.

Mr. Mickelson told me he didn't write this book sooner because he didn't want to give away trade secrets. "I said, 'Listen, until I win a major championship, the answer is, emphatically, no.' Until then, I didn't feel like I had the credibility to talk about technique. But even after I won my first major [the Masters in 2004], I refrained from writing an instructional because I knew there was such a lack of information about the short game, especially among my peers, that it would hurt my chances to perform at the highest level because my competition would get better."

Full-swing instruction and technique has advanced so far in the past decade or so, he said. The short game is another matter. "When they get inside 50 yards, their competency level drops off exponentially," he said. Ouch.



So why write the book now? "I feel more comfortable probably in my career, as I get older," he said. He turned 39 in June. "I also feel an obligation to try to help the game of golf, to educate the golfing public and make the game more enjoyable."

Part of the fun of the DVD is getting a taste of Mr. Mickelson's self-assured personality. He declaims on his favorite subject with passion. In reference to two often-taught chipping techniques—one that calls for locking the wrists and another that relates swing positions to a clockface—he says, "What? If anybody tries to teach you one of those two methods...you've got to run and find somebody who knows what the hell they're talking about."

The core of Mr. Mickelson's short-game approach is, first, to absolutely master making putts inside three feet and, second, to reliably park chips and short pitches inside that radius. Not four feet, from which distance even the Tour pros make only 90%, or six feet, from which the pros miss almost half. But three feet. "The key to the short game is not how well you putt, but where you putt from," he said.

He's serious about those three-foot putts. In season, he said, he practices making 100 three-footers in a row from a circle around the hole. If he misses on the 87th, he starts over, thereby simulating tournament pressure. And he recommends that anyone who is serious about improving his or her short game do the same, albeit at a level appropriate to an amateur's skill—maybe just 10 in a row to start.

"There are a million good ways to putt," Mr. Mickelson said, and he doesn't insist on any one technique. In fact, he said, the stroke itself is a minor, almost insignificant, part of putting. Much more critical are consistent setup, reading greens and—most important of all—aiming the clubface correctly. "You have to train your eyes," he said. "If you can't aim the clubface correctly, you've got no chance."

With chipping and pitching, however, he's adamant there's only one effective technique: his technique, which he calls "hinge and hold." He cocks his wrists immediately upon taking the club away from the ball, and holds that angle while accelerating the hands toward the target even after impact. "I've studied it, and all the great chippers through history have chipped this way," he said. As for amateurs, of the 200 or so he plays with annually in proams or outings, "maybe only two or three know how to chip correctly," he said. And not one of them can hit a proper flop.

time off

by William Westbrook

Columbia Artists Management (Frühbeck); Macao Museum of Art (jue); Love da Records (Watson); Mose Mak ('Nutcracker')

Bangkok

CONCERT

Bangkok Winter Music Festival: If you've fallen short of your Thai rock and pop goals this year, here's a chance to make up a lot of ground all at once, with eight hours from the likes of pioneering indie group Modern Dog, still together after 17 years; Flure, which last year picked up a Bangkok radio station's award as the most popular artist; and Lipta, whose name, band member Taron "Tan" Liptapallop told an interviewer, was his mother's idea.

Rajamangala National Stadium, 2088 Ramkamheang Rd., Huamark, Bangkapi; Dec. 26, 5 p.m.
Admission: 300 baht to 2,000 baht.
☎ 66-2262-3456
Web: www.thaiticketmajor.com

Beijing

CONCERT

2010 New Year's Concert: Austria lost its empire nearly a century ago, but the waltz-rich New Year's concert it pioneered has conquered the world. This one is courtesy of the Dresden Philharmonic—not quite Vienna, but just a few hundred kilometers away. Music director Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos will lead a program of favorites from Franz von Suppé's "Light Cavalry Overture," heard on many a cartoon, to a bit of Tchaikovsky's "Sleeping Beauty" to, of course, a hearty serving of Johann Strauss Jr., including the "Blue Danube" waltz and "Tik-Tak" polka.

Great Hall of the People, Tiananmen Square; Dec. 31, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: 200 yuan to 1,800 yuan.
☎ 86-10-6417-7845
Web: www.piao.com.cn

Hong Kong

CONCERT

A Viennese New Year's Gala: Meanwhile in Hong Kong, the orchestra is local—the Hong Kong Philharmonic—but the conductor is an import. Johannes Wildner, formerly a violinist with the Vienna Philharmonic, will lead the same program that the

Viennese played at the first New Year's gala in 1939, including Strauss's "Tales from the Vienna Woods" and "Emperor Waltz," plus his overture to "Die Fledermaus." And be prepared to clap along, Vienna-style, when the "Radetszky March" (by Johann Strauss, Sr.) is played as an encore.

Hong Kong Cultural Centre, 10 Salisbury Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon; Dec. 30 and 31, 8 p.m.
Admission: HK$120 to HK$380.
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

DANCE

The Nutcracker: Speaking of holiday traditions, the evergreen Tchaikovsky classic is a reliable Christmas staple for ballet companies around the world. This Hong Kong Ballet production, with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta providing the music, was choreographed by Stephen Jefferies, formerly the company's artistic director. It's the story of Clara and the nutcracker that she gets as a gift from her godfather—fortunately for the plot, her rather magical godfather. That night she finds herself shrunk down to the size of the nutcracker, and the nutcracker transformed into a prince. Adventures follow, including a swordfight with the Mouse King, who for a rodent is awfully good with the blade.

Hong Kong Cultural Centre, 10 Salisbury Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon; Dec. 18 to 20, Dec 23 to 26, 7:30 p.m.; Dec. 19 and 20, Dec. 25 to 27, 2:30 p.m.
Admission: HK$120 to HK$1,000.
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

Macau

EXHIBITION

The Season of Return—Treasures from the Palace Museum: Some 100 treasures from the Beijing museum, to be more precise, marking this year's 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China and 10th anniversary of the Macao Special Administrative Region. They range in period from the Neolithic (as early as 5300 B.C.) to the Qing Dynasty (which fell in 1911), and include paintings, tapestries, Buddha statues, objects in gold, silver, bronze, porcelain, jade, bamboo, wood, ivory and horn, enamelware and lacquerware. Among the more spectacular: a pair of 1.72-meter-high enamel elephant statues.

Macao Museum of Art, Macao Cultural Centre, Ave. Xian Xing Hai, Nape; to March 14, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., closed Mondays.
Admission: five patacas.
☎ 853-8791-9814
Web: www.artmuseum.gov.mo

Tokyo

EXHIBITION

Yang Fudong—The General's Smile: The first solo exhibition in Japan by Chinese film artist Yang Fudong, who depicts fragments of contemporary China in a tone that varies from documentary to theatrical. The works include "General's Smile," a large-scale video installation that seeks universal themes in a banquet for a senior military officer, and "Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest Part 3," a modern take on a popular ancient tale.

Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, 4-7-25 Kitashinagawa, Shinagawa-ku; Dec. 19 to March 28, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesdays until 8 p.m.
Admission: 1,000 yen.
☎ 81-3-3445-0651
Web: www.haramuseum.or.jp

Left, Beijing: Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos will lead the Dresden Philharmonic in a New Year's concert; above, from the top, Macau: a pitcherlike jade container called a 'jue,' from the Hongshan culture of ancient China (4000 B.C. to 3000 B.C.); Tour: Patrick Watson travels Australia and Asia; Hong Kong: It's 'Nutcracker' season!

Tour: Australia/Asia

Patrick Watson: "Close to Paradise," the first album by this quartet—which takes its name from its lead singer/songwriter—won the 2007 Polaris Music Prize for best Canadian album of the year. (Its second album, "Wooden Arms," was a finalist this year.) Before that breakthrough, the Montreal-based band had toured with James Brown and performed with Philip Glass, a hint at how hard the music is to pigeonhole, without even taking into account Mr. Watson's exceptional falsetto. The Sydney concerts are sold out, but some tickets will be available on performance days. Other stops include Brisbane and Perth.

Sydney: Spiegeltent, Hyde Park North, corner of College and Park Streets; Jan. 10, 11 and 13, 7 p.m.
Admission: A$45.
☎ 61-2-8248-6500
Web: www.sydneyfestival.org.au

Hong Kong: Grappa's Cellar, Jardine House, 1 Connaught Place, Central; Jan. 15, 8:30 p.m.
Admission: HK$220 (advance); HK$270 (at door).
☎ 852-2521-2322
Web: www.elgrande.com.hk

Beijing: Yugong Yishan, 3-2 Zhang Zizhong Rd., Dongcheng District; Jan. 17, 8 p.m.
Admission: 80 yuan (advance); 100 yuan (at door).
☎ 86-10-6404-2711
Web: yugongyishan.ning.com

Singapore: Esplanade Recital Studio, 1 Esplanade Drive; Jan. 19, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: S$80.
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.sistic.com.sg

Tokyo: Astro Hall, B1 New Wave Harajuku, 4-32-12 Jingumae, Harajuku; Jan. 21, 7 p.m.
Admission: 3,900 yen.
☎ 81-3-3462-6969
Web: www.creativeman.co.jp